

## **HOMELESSNESS, MENTAL HEALTH AND A LITTLE BRIDGE OF HOPE**

**By Julio Celada, LACDMH Support Groups in Spanish Project, 2015**



On a sunny Wednesday morning, I walk into room seven at Placita Olvera Church in downtown Los Angeles for a weekly support group that has been meeting for the past nine years, serving Spanish speakers. I find the group facilitators, Claudia and Juanita, speaking with a young woman who is barefoot, disheveled and wearing dirty men's clothing. She appears fearful and guarded but is eating fruit and drinking coffee. Having group facilitators bring refreshments has helped motivate people to participate in the support group.

"I was cursed before birth without beginning or end," the woman repeats monotonously. "The black spirits persecute me and I ask Saint Gemita to take my soul to heaven."

While members of the group file in, I walk to the social services office to ask for a pair of shoes for our new group member. Guillermo, the social services coordinator, known as "The Guardian Angel" to hundreds of abandoned people who come to church every day seeking help and serenity, follows me to the meeting room and places a pair of shoes near the woman's bare feet: an offering. She looks at them but doesn't touch them.

The support group begins with best wishes and welcoming words from the facilitators. An atmosphere of trust is in the air while each member introduces themselves and reviews the past week. Angela, the visitor, states her name and scans the environment with curiosity. The group acknowledges and accepts her; she acknowledges the friendly welcome in return. She respects each member's participation, listens to comments, speaking about herself and the world. She breaks into a shy smile when another participant speaks about traditions and music in countries around hers.

This is a special morning, because another group member, Wendy, attended group holding her little dog in her arms, sitting next to her mother. They first came to the group two months earlier, distraught with insomnia and fears, because of the threat of eviction from an apartment where they lived for many years, feeling that no one listened to their complaints and that even their neighbors hated them. When they came to group the first

time, they were afraid of being referred to a mental health center for a psychiatric evaluation. Things are different now. Wendy and her mom smile and are confident because they found legal assistance to prevent eviction. Moreover, they report feeling protected by the Virgin of Guadalupe, supported by the group and enjoy participating in the craft classes that the Support Group Project offers. In addition, Wendy is very excited with the idea of taking theatre classes, while her mother seems to have become our Support Group Project activist; every session she asks for more informational flyers about our support groups to disseminate in the community.

The meeting continues and Eliseo speaks, who is eager to talk. Eliseo is called the "Poet of the Town" by his fans, since he composes poems of gratitude alluding to recovery, and is also the coordinator of the May is Mental Health Month celebration event. Today, he looks elegant and happy. Hoping that his testimony will encourage the group, he speaks of his past homelessness: living under bridges, experiencing delusions of persecution and being incarcerated. Above all, he discusses a path to recovery, compliance with medication use and his remarkable emotional stability over the past four years.

Angela blinks her eyes while listening. At times, she looks lost and afraid. I wonder what traumatic memories or images fill her mind. Attempting to avoid those images and protect herself, she repeats over and over, "I was cursed before birth without beginning or end."

Angela also talks about her country of origin, her frustrated loves, her struggles to find food and safe places to sleep. She even admits that she prefers to walk without shoes. This last reference made me go back thirty years when I used to work at a hospital. I remember seeing a homeless woman who was in the emergency room because of acute appendicitis. She preferred to sleep on the cold floor instead of a comfortable bed, where the nurses had installed her. Angela doesn't remember or want to talk about her loved ones, nor disclose any contact phone numbers. On the other hand, she shares her experiences with alcohol and drugs. She adds that in order to prevent sexual harassment and to cope with multiple threats, she prefers to wear men's clothing.

This morning is a special time in our support group because everybody came, even Hugo is here. He is the star of the Amanecer Theatre Group and is the co-leader of the support group in the City of El Monte. He came for project coordination with Brenda, our theater group director. Hugo's mission is helping those who need support and talks about his relapses and problems with alcohol in the past. While he is talking about the importance of family support in the path toward recovery, Angela listens, but moves her head as if she didn't agree with him. Suddenly, someone suggests that Angela can get professional help at a mental health clinic, and she says out loud that she has been in many psychiatric hospitals and doesn't want anything to do with them.

Before concluding the meeting, the group members share a snack. Angela hurries to enjoy her last sip of coffee. Claudia, as a way to encourage group participants, talks about her motivational philosophy of the triple A: Aceptar, Ayudar, Accionar (accept, help, act). Then each member comments about how they felt in the group, the lesson learned from the session, and small, individual goals are set. Meanwhile, Juanita invites group members to stay to continue with craft activities and then walks Angela to the exit as she decides to leave.

Hugo and Eliseo will meet with Brenda to coordinate new tasks in the community, as part of the Support Groups in Spanish Project of the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health (LACDMH). It is a project that is culturally sensitive and adapted to the needs and hopes of the least served Latino communities. This exciting activity is being carried out by sixteen support groups in Spanish in several cities throughout the county, thanks to the trust placed in us by LACDMH Director Marvin Southard, DSW, and Deputy Director Cathy Warner, LCSW.

Finally, we all share the genuine hope that Angela will find her path to recovery and get help. The group facilitators, experts in these types of issues, are convinced that her experience in group today made her feel good. They believe she will return. We are left with the image of her disheveled figure and shy smile. Also, there are a pair of shoes waiting for her, as well as fruits and coffee, which often are transformed into tools that help people to share and mobilize emotions, as well as overcome fear, stigma and abandonment.